



Consumer Federation of America

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USDA Decision to Reduce Mad Cow Testing Based on Faulty Premise *Mad Cow Firewalls Need to be Strengthened*

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) decision today to reduce testing of U.S. cattle for mad cow disease to 40,000 animals each year is a case of overconfident expectations.

"USDA is basing its decision to reduce testing on faulty premises," said Chris Waldrop, Deputy Director for the Food Policy Institute at Consumer Federation of America. "The Department places too much faith in its firewalls, which are not as fool-proof as the Department thinks they are."

In justifying its decision to reduce testing, USDA claims that human and animal health is protected by a ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban and the removal of specified risk materials (SRMs), the tissues that are believed to contain the disease-causing protein, from the food supply. Both programs are subject to loopholes and lax enforcement.

The Department did introduce a ban on SRMs in the human food supply, but the evidence shows that this ban may only be successful on paper. There have been no changes to the inspection process and no additional inspectors employed to ensure adequate removal of SRMs. A January 2006 OIG report noted that many plants did not have adequate plans for removing SRMs while other plants did not even comply with the plans they did have. In addition, companies have not been required to slow their line speeds or utilize new technology to provide for complete removal of these materials.

The feed ban, as administered by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), is equally flawed. FDA still allows meat and bone meal from cattle to be fed to chickens and pigs, still allows poultry litter to be fed back to cattle and still permits cow's blood to be fed to calves. Each of these measures could contribute to the spread of mad cow disease. In addition, the GAO reported last year that FDA did not know where all the animal feed is being made or transported, did not routinely sample for prohibited material in feed and had not inspected many facilities for five years or more.

"If USDA wants to reduce testing, it needs to make sure its safeguards are really safe," Waldrop said. "Otherwise it's just wishful thinking."

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The Consumer Federation of America is a nonprofit association of 300 consumer groups, representing more than 50 million Americans nationwide, that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, education and advocacy.